

Flexible Workplaces: A Critical Strategy in the Global Talent Competition

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Ask any human resources professional, and they will vouch that the changing nature of business has necessitated that HR become a strategic partner by contributing to improved business results. At the same time, perhaps equally important as this momentous change to HR but surely requiring a much swifter response is the aggressive war for global talent. Fueled by shrinking pools of skilled workers and extreme competition over existing talent, a rapidly growing and desperate need to attract and retain top talent is emerging. Human resources professionals may perceive this phenomenon as a call to action for the profession to step up to the plate and earn its coveted proverbial seat at the table by creatively engaging in the competition for global talent. In fact, an emerging trend can be seen taking place in just the last decade – a redefining of the “workplace”. As many organizations with flexible workplace programs are realizing, some incredible returns are available for offering employees a flexible approach to work, ranging from tangible and immediate ROI to longer-term gains through retention and employee satisfaction. And, by combining flexible workplace strategies with recruitment efforts geared toward a few traditionally underutilized populations, the benefits are compounded.

### **The Need for Flexible Work Arrangements**

#### *Worldwide Labor Shortages*

Between 2008 and 2018, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (“BLS”) estimates only an 8.2 percent labor force increase in the United States, down 3.9 percent from 12.1 percent growth in the decade prior (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). On a larger scale, from 1950 to 2000, annual labor force growth was 1.6 percent. Forecasts predict a bleak .6 percent growth in the years 2000 to 2050. From 1950 to 2000 female participation in the labor force grew 2.6 percent annually. Forecasts predict only .7 percent annual growth from 2000 to

2050. In 2000, workers ages 55 and up comprised 13 percent of the workforce; by 2050 that number is expected to increase to 19 percent (Toossi, 2002). What this means is the entire U.S. labor pool is shrinking, translating to an even smaller pool of skilled workers.

The issue is replicated overseas – statistics show that 50 percent of Canadian nurses employed in 2003 will retire within 15 years; Japan is opening its doors to foreign workers as an effort to mitigate its labor shortages; top German engineering firms such as Siemens are giving science kits to toddlers to pique their interest in science and technology (Wright, 2009).

### *Quality of U.S. Workforce Entrants*

If a sharp drop in the labor force is not disturbing enough, the quality of future workforce entrants in the U.S. is especially alarming. “Middle and high-school students fare poorly on international comparisons of math and science achievement. Even in basic English, more than 60 percent of employers rate high-school graduates' skills as fair or poor... more than half of entering college students never graduate” (Grossman, 2005, Shrinking Labor Layer Cake paragraph). The BLS projects that occupations where a postsecondary degree is required will rise to one-half of new job openings and one-third of total job openings in the 2008 to 2018 period (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Given rapid technological developments requiring advanced skills and training, coupled with anticipated skills and knowledge deficiencies in future workforce entrants, the need to attract and retain the best of the best is more important than ever.

### *Changing Demographics*

Furthermore, demographic trends are causing organizations to re-think when, where, and how work is performed. Some of these trends include an aging workforce, changing family compositions, more women in the workforce, multi-generational needs, and the need for job mobility (Loney & Roundtree, Powerpoint Presentation: Customized Work Environments:

Changing When, Where, and How We Work, 2008). In a 2008 presentation on the success of its Customized Work Environments initiative, REI began by demonstrating the need for workplace flexibility. According to the statistics gleaned nearly 50 percent of all workers are women; 43 percent of these women have children under age 18; 62 percent of all workers have children under the age of six and 15 percent of workers have a child with special needs; 20 percent of all employed parents are single; 78 percent of married employees have spouses who are employed; 35 percent of employees had significant elder care responsibilities in the past year; 40 percent of those caring for elders also had care responsibilities for dependent children (Loney & Roundtree, Powerpoint Presentation: Customized Work Environments: Changing When, Where, and How We Work, 2008).

### ***Work Flexibility is an Economic Necessity***

From an economic standpoint, the issue of workplace flexibility is so pressing that in a 2010 report on Work-Life Balance and the Economics of Workplace Flexibility the Executive Office of the President Council of Economic Advisers recognized that the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace must be organized around the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. This new work era must take place on all levels – from new corporate policies, to updated wage and hour laws, to a transformation in the mindset of Americans about how and where work is performed. What all this means for HRM is that the need for flexible work arrangements is not only real, but is also an urgent business imperative providing an exceptional opportunity for HR to display leadership in an era of economic uncertainty.

### **Strategic Use of Flexible Workplace Policies Yields ROI**

Worldwide labor shortages, the diminishing quality of U.S. workforce entrants, and shifting worker demographics all demonstrate the need for organizations to seek out, attract, and retain the best workers. One highly effective way organizations can do this is by making the

“workplace” more fitting to workers’ needs by allowing employees to work when and where they want. Such programs can take the form of flexible policies designed to loosen the constraints of work while still maintaining some element of control over employees or by adopting approaches such as a Results-Only Work Environment (“ROWE”) where employees do whatever they want wherever they want and are only evaluated on the results they produce. The latter is still quite a controversial approach as it challenges even the most adept managers and goes against every traditional notion of work. The more common approach to workplace flexibility comes in the form of flexible policies such as reduced work schedules, virtual workplaces/telecommuting/hoteling, job sharing, flextime, compressed work weeks, phased retirement, and on and off-ramping/career flexibility. Whether through flexible policies or programs like ROWE many organizations that have rolled out formal workplace flexibility programs are seeing an overwhelmingly positive impact to their bottom lines. Organizations have reported such benefits as soaring productivity, a reduced carbon footprint, reduced work/personal conflict, enhanced creativity, reduced overtime, increased market value, savings on office-space rental and parking fees, savings on commuter expenses, more effective recruiting efforts, improved health and healthcare savings, and greater employee satisfaction which translates into greater retention, lower turnover, reduced absenteeism, and greater utilization of talent.

### ***WorldatWork Survey Findings***

The most compelling evidence for the benefits of flexible workplaces lies in observing organizations that already have them in place. In October 2007, WorldatWork released a research report on the prevalence and perception of work-life and benefit programs. Surveys were sent to 4,625 WorldatWork members. 649 responses were received for a 14 percent response rate (WorldatWork, 2007). Figure 1 depicts that a fairly large percentage of respondents

believed offering various forms of workplace flexibility yielded a moderate to high impact on attraction and retention compared to very few respondents who believed it yielded a low impact or no impact at all.

**Figure 1 - World at Work Survey Findings © WorldatWork**

Workplace Flexibility						Percent of companies with program
		Degree of Impact on Attraction and Retention				
		No Impact	Low	Moderate	High	
Flex-time	Attraction	2%	14%	49%	35%	82%
	Retention	0%	7%	43%	49%	
Part-time Schedules	Attraction	4%	23%	44%	28%	84%
	Retention	3%	16%	45%	36%	
Compressed Workweek	Attraction	4%	19%	40%	37%	52%
	Retention	2%	14%	41%	43%	
Telecommuting	Attraction	4%	20%	38%	38%	62%
	Retention	2%	14%	39%	46%	
Job Sharing	Attraction	10%	46%	35%	9%	36%
	Retention	7%	35%	43%	16%	
Phased Retirement	Attraction	17%	41%	34%	8%	32%
	Retention	8%	19%	45%	28%	

Moreover, the Alliance for Work-Life Progress (AWLP, 2007) compiled a business impact matrix (See Figure 2) of organizations that reported significant and measureable ROI from effective flexible workplace initiatives. Specific areas included reduced overtime and turnover, increased productivity, perceptions of greater autonomy, and higher market value.

**Figure 2 – AWLP Business Case for Work-Life © WorldatWork and AWLP**

Business Impact Matrix			
Work-Life Effectiveness Category	Company/Source	Business Initiative	Result
Workplace Flexibility			
	Hewlett Packard	Compressed workweek	200% increase in the number of transactions conducted on a daily basis 50% reduction in overtime Nearly <b>doubled</b> productivity*
	Watson Wyatt Human Capital Index	Workplace flexibility	Companies that support flexible work arrangements had 3.5% higher market value than companies without.**
	London School of Economics and Policy Studies Institute	Job autonomy	Research of 2,100 employees found that the amount of pressure, stress, motivation and enjoyment of the job is more influenced by how much control employees feel they have over their time rather than by long hours worked.**
	IBM	Workplace Flexibility	Workers who believe they have flexibility are able to work <b>eight hours more</b> a week and still feel they have work-life balance. **
	UPS	Flexible Work Schedules	<b>Reduction</b> in turnover from 50% to 6%**
	Illinois Bell	Telecommuting	40% increase in productivity*

\* Burud, Sandra and Tumolo, Marie 2004. Leveraging The New Human Capital. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing

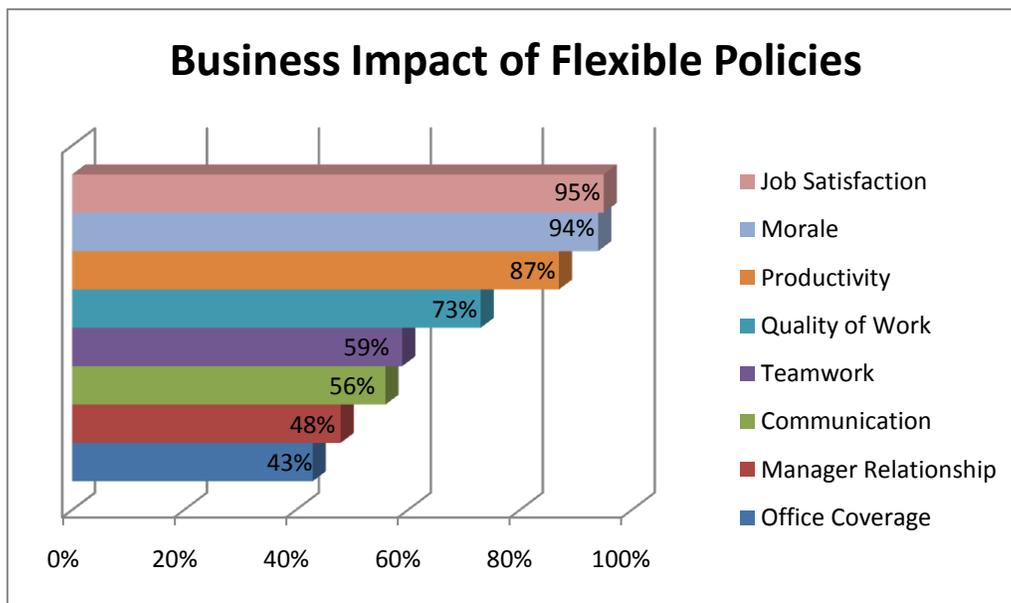
\*\* Work & Family Connection. 2005. The Most Important Work-Life-Related Studies. Minnetonka, MN

In addition to these success stories, two widely-known organizations that have reported notable achievement in the area of workplace flexibility include Recreational Equipment Incorporated (REI) and Best Buy.

### ***REI and Customized Work Environments***

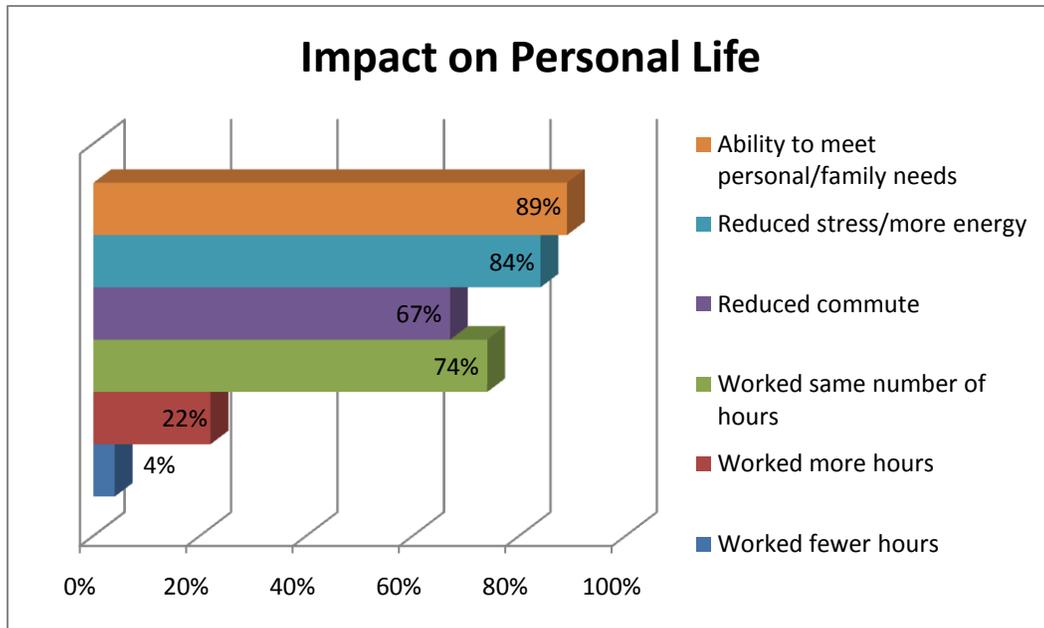
In June 2007, REI began a workplace flexibility initiative called Customized Workplace Environments (“CWE’s”). Various flexible work options were offered such as flextime, compressed workweeks, shift changes, reduced work schedules, job-sharing, telecommuting and virtual workspaces, off and on-ramps, sabbaticals, and various options for time management (Loney & Roundtree, 2008). Using this program as a strategic tool to accomplish work in the most efficient manner, the company experienced returns in the areas of enhanced recruitment, maximized retention, improved attendance, increased commitment, greater productivity, and better performance. Figure 3 shows the business impact of the initiative (Loney & Roundtree, 2008).

**Figure 3 – Business Impact of CWE’s at REI**



In addition to noteworthy impacts to the business, managers also reported significant results pertaining to employee's personal lives as shown in Figure 4 (Loney & Roundtree, 2008).

**Figure 4 – Personal Impact of CWE's at REI**



The company also reported that 76% of employees eliminated at least one roundtrip commute per week (Loney & Roundtree, 2008).

### ***Best Buy ROWE***

In 2004 Best Buy rolled out a program called Results Only Work Environment (“ROWE”) across three departments (called teams) at the company's corporate office. The basis of ROWE is that employees are free to do whatever they want, wherever they want as long as the work gets done. For Best Buy, the purpose of the program was to redirect the focus of employees and managers from set schedules and locations to measurable results and to create a program that could not easily be replicated by competitors. Over a two-year period, Best Buy looked at the talent retention of the three teams and recorded substantial cost savings as shown in Figure 5 (Ressler & Thompson, 2010).

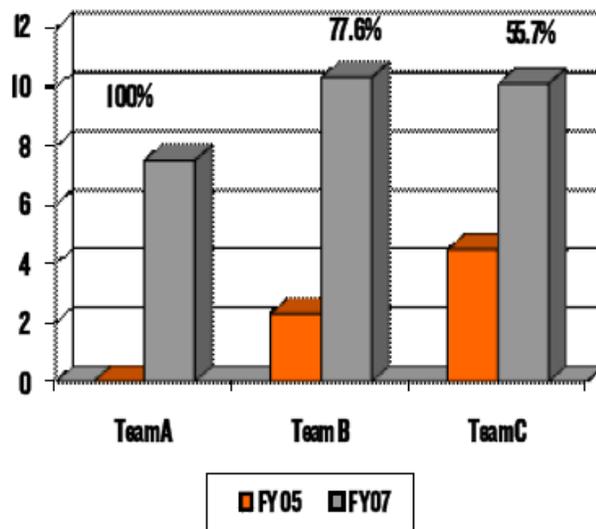
**Figure 5 - Cost Savings Associated with Reduction in Voluntary Turnover**

ROWE Team	Number of Employees	Voluntary Turnover FY05	Voluntary Turnover FY07	Voluntary Turnover Improvement (% points of change)	Average Turnover Cost per Employee	Voluntary Turnover Savings
Team A	~ 140	15.51%	0.00%	15.51%	\$102,000.00	\$2,214,828.00
Team B	~ 187	18.50%	2.31%	16.19%	\$102,000.00	\$3,088,080.60
Team C	~ 50	31.46%	4.49%	26.97%	\$102,000.00	\$1,375,470.00

Figure 6 shows a significant increase in involuntary turnover (Ressler & Thompson, 2010). The rationale behind this benefit is that, because employees are judged based on their performance the program effectively weeds out poor performers (Ressler & Thompson, 2010).

In terms of productivity, Team A (knowledge workers) reported a 10 to 20 percent increase in productivity per employee – the equivalent of \$10 MM annual benefit for the company – and Team C (production workers) realized more than 50 percent increase in business results (cost reductions) (Ressler & Thompson, 2010).

**Figure 6 – Involuntary Turnover**



A separate study was conducted in March 2005 by the University of Minnesota that looked at another group of workers to whom ROWE was offered and compared them to a group for whom the program was not offered. On the Work-Family front, the group of ROWE workers reported a decrease in negative spillover from work-to-family, less work-family conflict, increased time adequacy, and increased job security (Moen & Kelly, 2010). Changes in health-

related behavior included fewer sick workers coming to work on campus, more employees slept more than seven hours per night and experienced improved quality of sleep, more employees now go to the doctor when sick, increased frequency of exercise (3 or more times per week), and gains in energy (Moen & Kelly, 2010). Changes in work conditions and effectiveness included less low-value (unnecessary) work, fewer ROWE employees had turnover intentions, fewer work interruptions, less pressure to work overtime, more employees felt the culture was family-friendly, more workers had greater organizational commitment, and more employees reported greater job satisfaction (Moen & Kelly, 2010).

## **Compounded Benefits in Recruitment Strategies**

The benefits of flexible workplaces are compounded when companies unite flexible workplace programs with strategic recruitment of previously underrepresented populations such as American and Chinese women.

### ***U.S. Female Demographic***

**Participation in the labor force.** In the United States, although more women are participating in the workforce now than ever before, several factors cause women to leave the workforce either temporarily or permanently. According to the Center for Work-Life Law (2006), 86 percent of all women who leave their careers cite workplace constraints such as the amount, pace, and inflexibility of work as the primary reason why they left the labor force. In a 2004 survey conducted by the Center for Work-Life Policy, 44 percent of women cited familial reasons for leaving lucrative jobs and 23 percent left to earn a degree or other training (Hewlett & Luce, 2005).

**The costs of off-ramping.** Moreover, the obstacles women face when returning to the workforce after a period of absence is unfortunate. An article in the Harvard Business Review cites that women lose an average of 18 percent earning power when they take an off-ramp

(Hewlett & Luce, 2005). That figure is exacerbated the longer the woman is gone; across sectors, an absence of three years or more equates to an average loss of 37 percent in earning power (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). Combine these losses with prevailing wage gaps between men and women and the losses are especially damaging.

The pervasiveness of women leaving the workforce and the difficulty they experience in returning is unfortunate considering that careers, companies, and economies suffer when highly skilled and committed women's potential is overlooked or discounted. Approximately 76 percent of American women are actively working or seeking work (Barsh & Yee, 2011). Boosting that number to 84 percent (approximately 5.1 million women) would increase the U.S. economy by 3 to 4 percent – numbers which are critical to maintain the United States' leadership in the global economy (Barsh & Yee, 2011).

**Education, ambition, and potential.** By 2015 the number of women with graduate and professional degrees is expected to rise more than 16 percent compared to only 1.3 percent growth for men (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). Considering the ambition and potential of this demographic and given that women are far surpassing men in education attainment it makes business sense to focus recruitment efforts on women. In the business sector, 53 percent of women ages 28 to 40 considered themselves very ambitious (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). In a 2011 research report by Catalyst, the report found a 26 percent return on invested capital in companies where women had 19 to 44 percent board representation compared to companies with no female board members (Barsh & Yee, 2011). When asked what the four most important leadership attributes were for success, business executives globally cited intellectual stimulation, inspiration, participatory decision-making and setting expectations/rewards – all of which are more characteristic of women (Barsh & Yee, 2011).

**Converging strategies.** In the aforementioned study by Hewlett and Luce (2005), across all sectors 82 percent of women believed that access to reduced-hour jobs was important and almost two-thirds of the women (64 percent) surveyed cited flexible work arrangements as being either extremely or very important to them. At Johnson & Johnson, a focus group of 12 part-time female managers was gathered to understand their perceptions of its reduced-hour program. All of the women in the focus group said they would have quit had part-time work not been an option (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). With an understanding of the challenges women face in their careers and the immeasurable potential and talent women can contribute, companies that focus their recruitment efforts on this demographic and offer sustainable, flexible work programs position themselves for greater competitiveness and retention of these workers. Although experts agree there are a plethora of strategies for nurturing female talent, the natural complexities of this demographic warrant a hard look at the benefits of offering flexible workplaces.

Companies like Sprint Nextel Corporation and Campbell's Soup Company have latched on to the potential of this group and have started recruiting programs geared specifically toward women. With the goal of informing more women about job openings traditionally applied for by men, Sprint has employed strategies such as learning where women go to find work, enlisting the help of women-centric publications and organizations to make job openings more visible to subscribing members and visitors (Santonocito, Recruiting Women, 2010). From 2007 to 2008, the percentage of female employees increased from 42 percent to 46 percent (Sprint Nextel Corporation, 2011). Campbell's Soup has created a strong mentoring culture and career path transparency where information on experience required for advancement is freely shared (Santonocito, Best Practices in Recruiting and Retaining Women: Takeaways from the 2010 Catalyst Awards Conference, 2010). From 2005 to 2009, women in executive roles increased from 21 percent to 25 percent and women in plant director roles increased from 14 to 21 percent

(Santonocito, Best Practices in Recruiting and Retaining Women: Takeaways from the 2010 Catalyst Awards Conference, 2010).

### ***Chinese Female Demographic***

**Incredible potential.** American female talent is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to underutilized workforce potential. Experts say there is a hidden talent pool of deeply qualified and ambitious Chinese women, rivaling not only Chinese men, but their American counterparts (Birigwa & Sumberg, 2011). Consider these astounding findings of a new study by the Center for Work-Life Policy (Birigwa & Sumberg, 2011, p. 2):

- 76% of Chinese women aspire to top jobs, compared to 52% of American women
- Chinese women have impressive levels of commitment: 70 percent love their jobs and 76 percent are willing to go the extra mile for their employer. Over 85 percent express loyalty to their employer.
- The average workweek for Chinese women working for multinational organizations routinely exceeds 70 hours, one of the highest rates among the women surveyed among emerging markets
- 57 percent of educated Chinese women viewed government jobs as desirable, citing benefits, job security and prestige as the top reasons

**Flexible policies crucial to meet unique needs.** In light of these encouraging facts Birigwa and Sumberg (2011) say understanding the unique needs of this demographic is one of the most overlooked secrets to succeeding in this unique marketplace. Although Chinese women have adequate help for childcare, it is eldercare that poses a heavy burden on working mothers. 95 percent of Chinese women have eldercare responsibilities, 58 percent provide financial support for their parents, and 88 percent struggle to balance a career with the demands of eldercare obligations (Birigwa & Sumberg, 2011).

Companies that recognize this sort of talent potential overseas and who make it easier to recruit and retain this talent are better positioned to compete globally in the new business landscape. Dennis Loney, former Employment Practices Specialist of REI, gives the example of an employee in a key position from China. The company had spent a lot of money recruiting this employee – sponsoring his H1B visa and starting the green card process. However, the employee had only three weeks of vacation per year, which was hardly enough to maintain close relationships in his home country. Through the company's Customized Work Environments program, this employee was able to work virtually in China for six months out of the year – a solution that met both the company's and the employee's needs (Loney, Personal Communication, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

Considering worldwide labor shortages, dwindling numbers of qualified, educated American workforce entrants, and shifting demographics that both desperately need and demand flexibility, it is becoming increasingly critical to find ways to attract and keep first rate employees. Strategies like offering a flexible workplace and tapping previously underutilized populations such as American and Chinese women workers challenge HR's traditional view and treatment of the workplace, provide sustainable solutions to the competition for global talent, and support HR's advocacy of cultivating good talent and leadership. Although the concept of flexible workplaces is not typically used as an isolated strategy for attracting and retaining top talent it undoubtedly addresses the growing and distinctive needs of companies and employees alike. Many organizations that have employed flexible workplace strategies like REI, Inc., and Best Buy, Inc. and are not only realizing immediate returns but are developing the foundation needed for long-term sustainability and competitive success.

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